

Obituary

Stewart Sutherland: an appreciation

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Stewart Sutherland, who died on 29 January 2018, was editor of *Religious Studies* from 1984 to 1990. He was a philosopher with an interest in religion, particularly in Christianity as a ‘form of life’ which offers a distinctive practical understanding of what it is to live well as a human being. He explicitly set out to provide a revisionary development of Christian tradition, believing that the legacy of Christian theism offered something of great value to society and to individuals.

He said himself that his revisionary view would probably not score very highly on the scale of orthodoxy. But he thought that the language and practices of Christian faith made possible a view of life and a way of living in the world that was distinctive and difficult, if not impossible, to express in any other way. Thus, his view seeks both to preserve a specific religious outlook and yet to revise that outlook in radically new ways. It neither defends a form of religious orthodoxy nor dismisses religion as false or irrelevant. What he writes is a significant contribution to thinking about the place of religion in the modern world, and an important contribution to rethinking the nature of religious faith.

His view is outlined in many papers and articles, but mainly in three books, *Atheism and the Rejection of God* (1977), *Faith and Ambiguity* (1984), and *God, Jesus, and Belief* (1984). The first of these is an engagement with Dostoevsky, especially with *The Brothers Karamazov*, and with the central conversation in that book between the brothers Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov about the reality of suffering and evil in the world.

This interest is central for Sutherland, for it illustrates the importance for him of literature as a vehicle of philosophical reflection, and also his conviction that any thinking about God must begin from a full acceptance that much suffering is real, morally unjustifiable, and destructive of many traditional ideas of God.

Both of these convictions are controversial. Since the time of Plato, many have suspected that there is a war between poetry and literature on the one hand and philosophical truth on the other. The conversation of the Karamazovs illustrates

this well. It states the opposing views of both brothers, giving perhaps the most powerful argument against a good God in world literature, and leaving Alyosha without any obvious reply. Yet there is a sort of reply, in Alyosha's rejection of bitterness and rebellion, and insistence upon love of the beauty of the world and the cultivation of compassionate love. Can Alyosha's life be a reply to Ivan's arguments? Not, Sutherland suggests, in a purely intellectual or rational way. But perhaps the lesson here is that 'there is no single metaphysical picture' that can give a complete understanding of the world. That is the strength of great literature, that it provides no such coherent picture. It usually presents an ambiguous reality, a picture on the borderlands between belief and unbelief, where emotions can lie deeper than reasons, and where forms of life and ways of seeing the world are not based simply on the provision of publicly available and agreed reasons or evidence.

The acceptance of ambiguity and lack of finality in our ultimate judgements about the world has an effect on what we take to be philosophical truth. In particular, theodicy becomes impossible, if that is thought to be the provision of good reasons that a personal God might have for creating or permitting horrendous suffering. Sutherland is clear that the idea of God as a wholly good person or even as an individual object, supernatural or natural, with whom one might have conversations or personal relationships, is untenable. It is totally incompatible, as Ivan claims, with the suffering of innocent children.

That is indeed going to require a revision to most traditional religious views. But the word 'God' still, he argues, has a distinctive use. That use is to make possible a view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. The phrase is perhaps best known because of its use by Spinoza, who wrote, 'Those things which are conceived as true or real we conceive under the form of eternity and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God' (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 5, prop. 29, note). Again, 'eternity is the very essence of God, insofar as that essence involves necessary existence'. Sutherland does not usually explicitly refer to Spinoza, and the idea that all things devolve by necessity from God, who contains the essential natures of all things, is not one with which Sutherland would be comfortable. Yet the ideas of non-temporality and of necessity seem to be implied, so that what is being said is that there is something non-temporal and non-finite (therefore not 'a thing') beyond contingent and transient existence. That is not another separate and distinct reality, but an aspect of this reality in which we exist.

However, for Sutherland this should not be thought of as an object or set of objects which we could contemplate or intuit. We do not, as Schleiermacher said, 'intuit the eternal'. Rather, we intuit this world in the light of eternity. Like Kant's regulative ideas, the idea of eternity does not correspond to a knowable reality. It enables us to see the world from a viewpoint which is not that of any human being or group of human beings. As Kant put it, it is like a 'focus imaginarius', an imagined 'absolute view of things as they are', beyond all partial and finite perspectives. It is ideal rather than real; as Sutherland puts it, it is a possibility

rather than an actuality. Yet to appeal to it even as an unrealizable ideal enables us to see the world in a distinctive way.

Nor is this just one possibility among others. It is (though he does not, I think, use this word) an authentic possibility. It enables us, and he does say this, to 'see our world as it is'. Thus, it is not just one option among others. It reveals an important truth about the world, which is that the world is more than just a collection of finite entities. There is no appeal to God as an extra or supernatural entity. It is admittedly difficult to see precisely what is meant by seeing the world from the perspective of eternity. One clue lies in a statement by Kierkegaard, to which Sutherland refers in *Faith and Ambiguity*, that eternal significance cannot be found in world-historical terms. It is 'inward' and involves a certain sort of passionate commitment. 'The real subject is the ethically existing subject', Kierkegaard writes. Such ethical existence requires self-knowledge and a 'purity of heart which provides the perspective of eternity on [one's] doing and deciding'.

Like 'eternity', purity of heart is left undefined and perhaps indefinable, but it points to a state in which one's attention is not fragmented and scattered among a number of no doubt pressing temporal projects, but is concentrated on a 'transcendent' order beyond finite concerns, 'a transcendent order of eternal values', which are real but never completely grasped or embodied in temporally identifiable forms.

Sutherland resists the thought that the term 'God' can be translated without remainder into any other terms. The meaning of religious language is internal to the practices of worship, prayer, reverence, love, and humility which define religious life at its best. The temptation at this point may be to say that these are just subjective attitudes which one may care to adopt. But attitudes are specified by their objects. They point to features of reality to which the adoption of specific attitudes is appropriate. Those features, in the case of an ethical life, are possibilities rather than actualities, and we are not to just contemplate them as pure ideas in a quasi-(or pseudo-) Platonic sense. Sutherland says, 'possibilities define ontologies'. That is, the structures of reality allow the possibility of commitment to transcendent goodness, a commitment which is 'inward' and, as Kierkegaard put it, 'incognito'. I think that in fact for Sutherland they do more than allow; they demand, they have normative significance.

For Sutherland the idea of God is something like, though not adequately translatable without remainder into, the idea of a transcendent order of values, eternal because they do not change with time, and infinite because they are not particular existent objects within the world. They are not entities for contemplation, or entities beyond the world which can enter into causal relations with world-historical events. Therefore, Sutherland is not interested in miracles as physically discernible extraordinary events, in virgin births or physical resurrections. He is interested in identifying features of the world which make inward goodness possible, which demand such goodness, and in the light of which all human motives and goals must be judged.

For such a view, there can be no theodicy, for there is no supernatural person to blame for the ills of the world. But there are objective possibilities and objective demands, which are not just invented by human minds. Alyosha's answer to Ivan is that there is a demand to be compassionate and to love the world, and that it is possible to live so as never to be overcome by evil, even though one might be oppressed by suffering. Bitterness and rebellion are never appropriate. There is no grand coherent metaphysical picture of human life in the world that explains why suffering and evil exist. Here Dostoevsky, Hume, Kierkegaard, and Camus – about whom Sutherland writes so sensitively and tellingly in *Faith and Ambiguity* – are right to expose the radical ambiguity of human existence.

I believe that a return to Spinoza's idea of necessity might be helpful at this point. It would suggest that there is no positive reason why evil should exist except that the possibilities of evil exist necessarily in God, and they, or some unknown range of them, are necessarily actualized in this or in some or perhaps in all possible worlds. This is not because they are necessary means to good, or because they are freely chosen by a supernatural person, but just because they must be. We cannot 'see why' suffering exists, because there is nothing to see. Ivan cannot 'return his ticket', because he is simply compelled to travel. Since we cannot see why or how some things might exist by necessity, we are unable to attain a finally compelling metaphysical picture. But we may at least see that this is a possibility that the structure of reality might allow. The question is how one will react to this situation; that is our 'inward choice'.

In this ambiguous and imperfect world, Sutherland writes that 'the inheritance of theism includes the cultivation of an awareness of the eternal in human life'. Among the necessities of being, there is a transcendent order of eternal values. Awareness of them takes the form of 'a demand from without', and its main elements are concern for others and humility (importantly, in the way one holds one's beliefs as well as in the way one comports oneself in social life). Human lives are an 'intersection of the eternal and the temporal, the finite and the infinite'. Though Sutherland is perhaps too metaphysically sceptical to follow Spinoza here, one could say (Hegel did say) that the temporal and finite are necessarily and essentially imperfect, even though they essentially express part of what God (*qua* impersonal source of beings) is. The eternal and infinite remain in the essence of God, as timeless and spaceless possibilities of being, and they are known by human beings as possibilities to be realized in human lives.

At this point Sutherland finds value in the Christian claim that 'the transcendent has been manifested in time'. For him this will mean (though I am oversimplifying a little here) that the eternal values of compassion and humility have been manifested in a human life. There are, however, two important points he makes about any such manifestation. One is that such a thing cannot be established by historical research. Such research is always doomed to be inconclusive and can only arrive at contestable results. Thus, there can be no question of historical 'proofs' of Jesus' divinity or of the claim that he is a 'manifestation of the eternal'.

The other point is that the goodness of Jesus, like the goodness of any human being, must remain incognito. We can never show that when he died he was not overcome by evil or at least by doubt and despair. Yet if his death on the cross was in faithfulness to his vocation it shows something important about the nature of God – it shows that the triumph of good over evil is possible, and it makes possible a certain form of hope and ultimate optimism. This is not hope for some future good, or a belief that everything will in fact turn out for the best historically. Things have certainly not always turned out well since the death of Jesus. Nor is it a hope for future immortality which might compensate for this life's miseries. The idea that somehow future bliss might compensate for or in some way balance out present suffering is not one that appeals to Sutherland. The hope is rather that goodness cannot be defeated, that true goodness is possible, and that the nature of goodness is not worldly success, but a sort of self-renunciation and commitment to action for the sake of goodness alone.

This is coherent with a picture of God, not as a dictatorial sovereign, but as one who experiences suffering or a self-renouncing attention to goodness. Of course, for Sutherland such anthropomorphism must itself be renounced. There is no supernatural being who dictates or who suffers. This is a picture of the possibility of goodness and its manifestation in the human world, and that goodness will take the paradoxical form of inward self-renunciation and attentive and compassionate love of the world and of others without possessiveness.

There is a significance in the life of Jesus, but it is not one that can be established by historical research, or that requires acceptance of detailed records in the Gospels of his life and deeds. Rather, that person and that life in fact generated in history a startlingly distinctive view of God, or of the possibility of incarnating transcendent goodness in a human life. This possibility assures the triumph of good over evil, even though it does not guarantee a successful outcome, in worldly terms, of human activities. Jesus' death on the cross was not a success in worldly terms – the Kingdom did not come. But it achieved an ultimate hope and optimism, and the faith that eternal values can be manifested in time, and that they give ultimate significance to a human life, however the history of the world goes on.

Seen in these terms, the life of Jesus is not an eruption of the supernatural into the natural world, replete with miracles and physically inexplicable events. It is the revelation of an authentic possibility and demand that human lives should manifest eternal values, that goodness cannot be defeated, and that the real significance of human lives will be found in an intersection of the eternal and the temporal.

Though the testimony of history will always remain ambiguous, the idea of such an intersection originated in the life of Jesus and in the perceptions his disciples had of him. This idea took a distinctive form, largely because of the history of Israel, its basic values, and its forms of life, and was recorded in different forms in the Gospels, as Jesus' early followers sought to express how it seemed to them that the idea was manifested for them in his life and person. That does

not provide or require irrefutable evidence of exactly what happened in history. It requires only that at that point in history a distinctive perception of God arose, a new way of living *sub specie aeternitatis*, and that a new possibility of manifesting a transcendent order of values in the ambiguities of the temporal world was discerned.

There are those believers – to be honest, probably most believers – who would wish for a greater place for something like ‘a power making for righteousness’ in history and in human lives, and who would hope for a more unequivocal triumph of the good either in history or in the world to come. Sutherland will not, I think, allow this, though his view does not exclude it. And he would be the last person to think that his view is the final word on the subject of religious belief. Yet he is arguably right in querying any claim that God is a supernatural person who can intervene in history at will, and in refusing to make the hope for a better future an essential or primary motivation for ethical existence. He is right in his insistence that transcendent values are not objects to be contemplated for their own sake, but function to lay down possibilities for temporal existence. Furthermore, any morally acceptable view of God must find a way of accepting that there is horrendous suffering which is not in any way a means to a greater good, and which cannot be justified by any amount of future happiness. That almost certainly means that God is not one separate person or individual beyond the universe who is wholly benevolent, and who is one of the things that exist, even if a supernatural one.

He is also right in arguing that the significance of the life of Jesus is that it is the originating basis of a distinctive form of the belief that human lives can become manifestations of eternal values, and that in this way finite and infinite can be united in human existence. This cannot be established by historical research, or by claims that physical miracles have occurred. There is no external sign of the vindication of goodness, which must remain inward and incognito. But there is an insight that was discerned by the disciples in and through the person of Jesus, and gives rise to an ultimate optimism that good cannot be defeated by evil. The legacy of theism is to preserve this ultimate optimism and a form of life which makes sense of practising reverence, love, and humility, by maintaining a commitment to the ethical in an ambiguous world.

When Sutherland considers Dostoevsky, David Hume, Kierkegaard, Weil, and Camus, he claims that they too find in human consciousness a claim to some sort of objective goodness which does not entail over-ambitious theories about the evils of the world as ultimately justifiable or good. Such theories are not what seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis* provides. What that way of seeing provides is the awareness that we need not be defeated by suffering or by despair at human evil. There is something eternal that we can to some extent and in some way manifest in time, and that no evil can defeat – at least in the inwardness of human lives. Such a faith is not separated by an impassable gulf from the lives of those who reject talk of God, but who have an awareness of the inescapable

demands of morality. There is a real and vitally important sort of faith that lies on the borderlands between belief and unbelief. Talk of God is a way of preserving that awareness by placing it within a more general way of seeing the world and the possibilities it contains, and talk of Jesus as 'the Son of God' is a way of seeing that this is a possibility that is truly open to men and women. One can avoid metaphysical abstractions, and preserve this view of the possibilities and ideals of human lives, and perhaps that lies at the heart of Christian faith.

To say these things, and to say them with the patience and subtlety, the humour and insight that are characteristic of Sutherland's writings, is to increase one's understanding of the phenomenon of religion, and to suggest new and penetrating ways of approaching Christian faith in the modern world.